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Seldon, Sandra, Waring, Ruth and Thomas, Kate

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Continuing Professional Development for Level 3 Vocational Tutors: changing perceptions about Higher Education

Sandra Seldon

Norton Radstock College
SWITCH

Ruth Waring

University of Bath

Kate Thomas

University of the West of England

Aims of the project

In 2009, Norton Radstock College and the Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network (WVLLN) collaborated on a project which aimed to:

- facilitate Further Education tutors' raising of aspirations among successive cohorts of Level 3 vocational learners
- raise awareness of issues in the Further and Higher Education sectors around the progression of vocational students onto higher education
- increase the level of communication between practitioners in the two sectors.

Background to the project

The WVLLN is one of 29 Lifelong Learning Networks funded by HEFCE from 2006 and is made up of seven universities and 16 Further Education colleges in the northern part of the south-west. HEFCE funded the Lifelong Learning Networks with the aim of increasing the clarity and coherence of progression routes into Higher Education for vocational and adult learners.

Early on in the funding period, the WVLLN established that the key influencers on Level 3 vocational learners are their tutors (a survey of 200 vocational learners in the region showed that around 50% saw their tutors as their main source of advice about progressing to Higher Education). At the same time, discussions with Further Education guidance managers highlighted that a significant proportion of Level 3 tutors on vocational courses at some colleges had progressed into Further Education teaching via industry rather than through Higher Education.

Norton Radstock College is a successful Further Education College in the heart of rural Bath and North East Somerset. The college is well placed to serve the local communities in and around Bath, Bristol, Wiltshire and Somerset.

As a true Community College, it has continued to respond to the needs of individuals, local groups and surrounding business communities, expanding its range of vocational programmes to become an established part of the community. Vocational training covers a wide range of subjects from Animal Care and Horticulture to Art & Design, Engineering and Hairdressing.

Visits to academic departments as staff development

Discussions between the WVLLN progression coordinators and the college's Professional Development Manager resulted in Engineering and Health and Social Care vocational tutors attending small-scale, personalised visits to university academic departments. The university visits involved the tutors meeting academic admissions tutors in a very informal setting, sitting in on lectures and having campus tours with the opportunity to talk to current Higher Education students from their subject areas. In the case of the Engineering visit, Further Education staff also met two subject staff from other local colleges.

Norton Radstock College recognised that these visits formed a valuable part of the tutors' Continuing Professional Development. Tutors were encouraged to reflect on the activities as part of their portfolio of evidence towards Institute for Learning registration. Feedback from tutors was collected immediately after the visits and eight months later in order to assess if the tutors felt that they had resulted in changes to their professional practice.

Examples of immediate tutor feedback

"It was good to see everything here and to talk about the detail of admissions, particularly the personal statement, the way the tariff works and the Criminal Records Bureau. We will be a much better position to advise our students now. It's very difficult to get this kind of information when you're teaching".

"It's been much more informal than I expected, friendly and welcoming. My preconceptions about university were very different and that would probably be the same for our students. Exposure to a university environment is very important for their progression aspirations".

"We have felt very welcome, as if, even though we come from a small college, we do matter".

Examples of tutor feedback eight months after the campus visits

"The amount of discussions we had about different things – after going round the workshops and seeing their Eco Car it triggered conversations about the Technology Challenge we've just done with our own students – we did the F1 for Schools – it was a

DIRECT result of coming to Bath! And now, for the first time they've (the National Diploma students) started to talk about what they're going to do and those conversations are happening before Christmas... they were actually talking about it..."

"We've talked about copying that idea (maths workshop with one lecturer directing and a number of other lecturers/postgraduate helpers circulating) with someone doing the lecture side and other lecturers in the room – across the patch a bit more..."

"Since the visit, I certainly think it's encouraged me and my colleague to talk to the students a bit more about it (going to Higher Education) and to feel a bit more confident about answering their questions".

Conclusion

The Head of the Department for Health and Social Care at Norton Radstock College identified that:

"...what was really good about this project was that we have the personalisation agenda in Further Education in relation to the students' learning, and what happened here was a personalisation of the tutors' experience of Higher Education."

The success of the project highlights the way that facilitating the development of personal contacts between the FE and HE practitioners can have a big impact on changing the perceptions and misperceptions about the progression opportunities which exist for vocational learners.